

Proposed ARVN Operation
May 1970

14 May 70 Helms to Laird memo re Comments on the Proposed ARVN
Operation

May 1970 Map showing NVA troop locations in Cambodia

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

14 May 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Melvin R. Laird
The Secretary of Defense

SUBJECT : Comments on the Proposed ARVN Operation

This memorandum constitutes the response to your request for comments on intelligence data or matters relevant to the proposed operation in which approximately 8,000 ARVN troops will be committed to the southeastern portion of Cambodia up to a line extending roughly from the Neak Luong ferry crossing to the sea coast at the port of Kampot.

I. Situation in Southeastern Cambodia

A. Enemy Actions

1. During April-May 1970, Communist forces attacked a number of key towns and transportation junctions in southern and southeastern Cambodia, including Takeo, Angtassom, Kampot, and the Mekong River ferry crossing south of Phnom Penh at Neak Luong. These places are of considerable importance as they are astride transportation routes south of Phnom Penh. Although the ferry crossing is back under government control, after being held temporarily by the Communists, the towns are still under heavy enemy pressure, particularly Takeo. The extent of Communist activities in the southern regions of Cambodia is illustrated by current reports which indicate some Communist forces have begun operating as far west as Route 4 in Kampot and Kompong Speu Provinces.

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B. Enemy Strengths

3. At this time it is not possible to estimate the number of enemy troops currently operating in southeastern Cambodia. The total strength of units and staffs astride the southern Cambodia-South Vietnam border -- from the coast as far north as Base Area 709 just south of the Parrot's Beak -- is probably between 6,500 and 7,000 men. Units comprising this aggregate are: the 88th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Infantry Regiment, possible elements of the 95th NVA Infantry Regiment, Headquarters (Communist) Military Region 2 (MR 2), 195th Transportation Battalion, 1st NVA Division, 101 D NVA Infantry Regiment, 18B NVA Infantry Regiment, and rear service security and other support elements. Of these forces, however, probably only about 4,000 Communist troops are presently posing an immediate threat to the area of the proposed operation in Cambodia. The disposition and estimated strengths of all enemy units believed astride the border are as follows:

-- 88th NVA Infantry Regiment - The headquarters of this unit has been located in Base Area 709, just south of the Parrot's Beak. We know [] that some of its subordinate elements had been assigned the mission of increasing pressure on ARVN units and pacification in Kien Tuong Province. We do not now know the current location of any of the regiment's four infantry battalions. []

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-- Headquarters (Communist) Military Region 2 (MR 2) has been located just northeast of Base Area 704, west of 709.

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The headquarters and staff of MR 2 is estimated at about 1,100 men, of which some elements are located well within South Vietnam.

-- The 195th Transportation Battalion also operates out of Base Area 704 and possibly also in Base Area 400 in South Vietnam.

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[redacted] evidence indicates that the unit operates out of Cambodia, supplying combat forces in western VC MR 2 and MR 3. The strength of the battalion is currently estimated at 500 men.

-- 1st NVA Division and support elements -- The headquarters has been operating in Base Area 400 in South Vietnam and may be coordinating the activities of its subordinate regiments - 101 D and 18B - with Headquarters, MR 2. The headquarters and support elements of the division are estimated at about 1,450 men although some of these may not be in Base Area 400.

-- 101 D NVA Infantry Regiment - The unit's headquarters has been located in Base Area 400 since its deployment with its four battalions to IV Corps from III Corps in late 1969. The unit, currently located slightly west of the base area across the Cambodian border, is carried at a strength of about 1,000 men. At least one of the battalions was located near the border on 1 May 1970.

-- 18B NVA Infantry Regiment - The unit arrived in Base Area 400 in August 1969 with four battalions. In April of this year, the unit shifted slightly southward of Base Area 400.

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[redacted] The battalions are currently unlocated. Although the unit is estimated at a strength

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of 1,200 men, probably not all of them can be considered as part of immediate threat to Cambodia.

4. In addition to these forces mentioned above, it is also probable that Base Area 709, 704, and 400 contain rear service security and possible other support elements which we have as yet not been able to identify [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Moreover, we carry two independent NVA sapper battalions in VC An Giang Province which are currently unlocated but which may possibly be in Cambodia or along the border. These units probably have a combined strength of 300 to 500 men.

C. Logistical Importance to the Communists

5. We have little recent information on VC/NVA logistic activities in Kampot, Takeo and southeastern Kandal Provinces in Cambodia. The only base area in these provinces known to be active is Base Area 704 located at the borders of Kandal, Takeo and South Vietnam. The 195th Transportation Battalion operates in the southern part of this base area but the size and/or location of its supply storage facilities are not known. Base Area 704 supplies at least four enemy regiments that operate out of Base Area 400 located in Chau Doc Province.*

6. The only other area of known logistic significance, former Base Area 705 (located midway between Base Area 704 and the coast), apparently ceased to be active in early 1968. Prior to this time this base area was thought to be a storage area for supplies being moved into Base Area 400 (Seven Mountains area) inside

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[REDACTED]

* Base Area 400 is located entirely within South Vietnam in an area southeast of the planned area of operations. The Communists probably consider Base Area 400 as secure as any area in Cambodia and have used this base area as they used base areas in the Parrot's Beak and Fishhook areas to supply and give sanctuary to their forces in the southern delta.

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D. Location of Cambodian Forces

7. When hostilities broke out between Cambodian and Communist forces two Cambodian battalions were located fairly close to the South Vietnamese border, one in Kandal Province and the other in Takeo Province. By late April one battalion had withdrawn to Angtassom and the other to Kampot. Numerous border posts, manned primarily by paramilitary troops prior to the hostilities, are believed to have been abandoned or overrun.

8. About 10,000 Cambodian troops are presently located in the area of Cambodia's Military Region (MR) II that extends from the border to Route 4 and from the Mekong River to the south. The nearest Cambodian troops to the proposed area of operations are at Kompong Trach, which is located about 8 miles from the border, and Takeo, about 25 miles from the border. Throughout MR II the bulk of the Cambodian Army (FANK) units are deployed in static defensive positions in or near the major towns as indicated in the following table:

II. The Impact of Allied Actions on the Position of the Lon Nol Government

9. After two weeks of large-scale allied operations in eastern Cambodia, on its rivers, and along its coasts, the proposed action -- of itself -- would not represent a major new political element in the Indochinese equation. Communist expectations of ever-broadening allied cross-border activity would be confirmed and Hanoi would feel further harassed. At least at the outset of the proposed operation, Phnom Penh's hopes for assistance in coping with VC/NVA attacks in this southerly sector would be fulfilled, Lon Nol would be elated, and the morale of the Cambodian Army and populace strengthened.

10. The actual military impact of the allied action would be contingent upon several factors, including the degree of surprise achieved. We are not sanguine on this score. In all likelihood, the Communists will have sufficient warning of the attack to avoid entrapment of their major units. On the other hand, unless they are willing to stand and fight against superior allied arms -- rarely the case in recent Cambodian operations -- the Communists will probably be compelled to abandon current efforts to take and hold major towns and outposts in the area of operations. Thus, the regime in Phnom Penh would be able to reassert control of such towns as Takeo, Angtassom, and Kampot, and the routes between them and the capital.

11. As allied operations progressed, however, there would be increasing concern among the Cambodians lest Communist forces, following established tactics, evade the allied thrust and retreat northward toward Phnom Penh and its environs (including the government military depots at Kampong Speu). Such a northward move, even if Communist forces are in retreat, would generate alarm in Phnom Penh and probably produce loud appeals for direct allied assistance for the defense of the capital region.

12. Expecting such panicky reactions and aware, moreover, of the resultant discomfort that would be caused in Washington, the Communists will probably try to exploit any opportunities to increase military pressures against Cambodian towns and military units in districts close to the capital. These would probably be in the nature of sporadic attacks, however, rather than part of a concerted military drive on Phnom Penh itself.

Though such actions would unnerve the Lon Nol regime, the impact would not necessarily be lasting.

13. We consider unlikely a major Communist drive into the capital region as a reaction to the projected allied assault. Communist forces ranged within striking distance of the capital -- on three sides -- do not appear sufficiently strong to be assured of success in such an effort, even against purely Cambodian forces. Moreover, there is the likelihood, in the Communist view, that ARVN ground troops and U.S. air units would assist Lon Nol in countering any such move. Finally, there is clearly no necessity for the Communists, in evading the planned allied thrust, to withdraw toward Phnom Penh. They are not in a cul-de-sac; there are broad and familiar marshy zones to the south and east and well-established mountain and forest refuges to the west.

14. As for political considerations, the weight of argument similarly falls on the side of Communist restraint vis-a-vis Phnom Penh as a reaction to the proposed allied action. Not that we expect the Communists to tolerate indefinitely a hostile Cambodian regime. Indeed, it is apparent that Hanoi and Peking, if not the Russians have written off any possibility of a "deal" with Lon Nol and are embarked on a long-range campaign to crush him. Of course, it may be that Hanoi presently sees great value in adapting a more urgent timetable for unseating him and bringing Sihanouk back into the country at the head of some trumped-up "Indochinese liberation" force. Though not ensuring the restoration of their border "sanctuaries," the fall of Lon Nol (and return of Sihanouk) would provide Hanoi with a needed psychological lift, restore a degree of rear-area security to its Cambodian-based forces, and greatly embarrass the U.S. Government internationally and at home.

15. For Hanoi, however, the critical element in the allies' Cambodian operations is the degree to which they may permanently and seriously impair VC/NVA freedom of action in eastern Cambodia. Should Hanoi become nervous about the longer term impact of allied operations, a bolder and more energetic effort to get rid of Lon Nol, perhaps by taking Phnom Penh -- to install a friendly regime and to reassert Communist mastery of eastern Cambodia -- would become increasingly urgent.

16. In a larger context, there are a number of signs that recent events in Cambodia have stimulated Hanoi toward a major policy review which may be resolved long before the net impact of current allied operations in Cambodia can be measured. There are, for example, some indications that the Communists are considering a shift in priorities -- from South Vietnam to Laos or Cambodia. An appraisal of the new difficulties in waging "protracted warfare" in southern South Vietnam might have made more attractive a strategy focussed on administering massive political-psychological shocks to the U.S. in Laos and Cambodia, where incremental increase, in Communist military efforts might appear to offer promise of decisive results -- the fall of both the Souvanna and Lon Nol regimes. Such actions might be followed by tempting peace overtures involving all of Indochina.

17. In short, one more allied operation into Cambodia, of itself, is not likely to alter the overall Communist view of the Indochina situation. Hence, it is unlikely, of itself, to stir Hanoi to an immediate military adventure against Phnom Penh, though some sporadic military attacks in the vicinity, for limited purposes, cannot be ruled out. But the proposed action, taken in the context of allied moves of the past two weeks, particularly to the extent that these are successful in limiting Communist capabilities against South Vietnam, will indeed bear heavily on Hanoi's decisions and actions vis-a-vis the Lon Nol regime.

III. Effects in IV Corps of the Diversion of ARVN Troops to the Proposed Cambodian Operation

18. Communist military units in South Vietnam's IV Corps would undoubtedly like to mount some sort of offensive operation to take advantage of absence of South Vietnamese troops committed to the Cambodian front, but major actions against prime target areas seems unlikely in the near future.

19. The bulk of the North Vietnamese Main Force units that moved into IV Corps last year and early this year are holed up in remote base areas in the mountains of southern Chau Doc Province and the inhospitable swamps of the U Minh Forest in western An Xuyen Province. Most Viet Cong first-

line fighting units, heavily laced with North Vietnamese fillers, are also well away from key targets. While there has been some planning for future upsurges of hostilities as part of the May phase of the current "spring" campaign, there has been no hard evidence that major Corps-wide actions are imminent or that areas from which ARVN combat forces have been drawn are under immediate threat.

20. At present, 3,500 South Vietnamese troops from IV Corps are involved in cross-border operations just north of the IV Corps-Cambodian line while some 3,200 others were pulled back into South Vietnam on 13 May. There has been no significant enemy action in the delta provinces since these operations began and it appears that if any increase in offensive activity is staged, it will be limited in scope and intensity.

21. On the other hand, if South Vietnamese forces which have been holding particular enemy units at bay, or have been providing necessary back up for the territorial forces in certain sectors are drawn upon for future out-of-country operations, the Communists may try to test the defenses of the remaining units with increased actions. Other serious situations could develop in some border regions if ARVN units which have been acting as blocking forces move out. Also, if the more mobile ARVN units which normally respond to crisis situations in the delta provinces are committed elsewhere, localized problems could develop. Precise judgments on the impact of the proposed operation are, of course, heavily dependent on the particular ARVN units involved and the areas from which they are drawn.

Richard Helms
Director

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Attachment - Map

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Mekong River on the East,
cities of Prey Lorea, Takeo,
Krong Kep and Kampot
to the West.